

#195 JOHN WILBERDING: WHEELER FIELD

**Steve Haller (SH):** My name is Steve Haller and we're at the Sheraton Waikiki Hotel in Honolulu. It's December 4, 1991 at nine AM and I'm speaking with Mr. John Wilberding. Mr. Wilberding was a Private in the Army Air Force [*Corps*] at Wheeler Field at the time. His specialty was in armor and December 7, 1941, Mr. Wilberding was eighteen years of age and he's now sixty-eight. And I want to thank you very much for helping us here. We're putting on this tape for the National Park Services, *ARIZONA* Memorial, oral history project, and we're working in conjunction with KHET-TV, and we're very glad that you could be here with us today, John.

**John Wilberding (JW):** Well, I thank you for inviting me.

SH: I would like to start by asking you about your service career and why don't you tell us a little about how you got into the service and why?

JW: Well, when you're that age, seventeen, eighteen, you know, your thoughts are random and they are flung to the far faces of the earth and I was raised on a farm and farming really didn't appeal to me -- that early rising and milking the cows. And in high school, you read about the beautiful sunshine in Hawaii, and I talked to a recruiter and he said, "If you enlist now, we'll send you to Hawaii."

And I told my mother and father about it and they said, "Whatever you want to do, fine."

So lo and behold, I signed up and my first stop was Jefferson Barracks, Missouri, where we lived in the tents in the middle of winter.

SH: What year was that?

JW: That was 1940.

SH: Forty? Okay.

JW: December the eleventh was my date of enlistment. And so we spent time there 'til January of '41. And then I was sent to armament school in Lowrey Field in Denver, Colorado.

SH: Did you want to get into the Air Corps at that time specifically?

JW: Yeah.

SH: That was part of the deal that you made, as it were, when you enlisted?

JW: Yes, I enlisted for the . . .

SH: For the Air Corps?

JW: Yeah, for the Air Corps, yeah. And at Lowrey Field, I was there from January of '41 until June of '41, and then we were sent to Hawaii. And that was . . .

SH: How did you get up to Hawaii?

JW: On a ship.

SH: On a ship?

JW: Yeah.

SH: What ship was it? Do you remember?

JW: Oh gosh, I don't remember. It was a big one. (Laughs)

SH: From . . . ?

JW: Yeah, it was from San Francisco.

SH: From San Francisco. Was it Fort Mason? Do you recall, or was it . . .

JW: Yes.

SH: . . . one of the commercial piers?

JW: No, no. It was one of the commercial piers. We were at Fort McDowell and from Fort McDowell we came in and I don't remember the dates. I don't even remember how long it took us. But when we got here, of course, I was sent to Wheeler Field.

SH: Directly?

JW: Mm-hm.

SH: And what outfit were you assigned to?

JW: I was assigned to the 47th Pursuit Squad[ron].

SH: What were the typical duties that you'd be doing as an armorer?

JW: Well, our job was to maintain the guns on the plane. At that time, there were two types. We had the P-36, which was -- some of those were firing their guns through the propeller, and ours was to make the adjustments so that they didn't shoot the propeller off. And then we got the P-40s and they had the, of course, the fifty caliber's in the wings. So it was to maintain that weaponry and to bore sight them so that they would be accurate in their firing. And also to secure the bombs to the planes. And, you know, that's, anything to do with armament.

SH: Did those planes commonly carry bombs?

JW: Yes. One under the belly. And as I recall, it's about a three hundred pounder.

SH: How was the bore sighting . . .

JW: Well, you had the gun sight in the cockpit and you would raise the rear of the plane up so it was level. And then I don't recall how many yards out we

would pick a target, and then the adjustment was made to each gun and we fired to get the particular target.

SH: Okay. When we start talking about the events approaching the December seventh, did you notice or did you get any word of any particular sense of heightened urgency or alertness in the days prior to December seventh, or was it business as usual?

JW: Well, let me backtrack just a little.

SH: Please.

JW: I was in the 47th and they were expanding the Air Corps, so they started a new squadron, which was the 72nd Fighter Squadron, or Pursuit Squadron. And I was transferred to the 72nd Pursuit Squadron. And prior to Pearl Harbor, those months, apparently there was some concern, something was in the offing, because off time was used to build rebutments, all around Wheeler Field, and I think some of those rebutments, there maybe some remnants left. And that was our particular job. And as time went by, of course there was always that speculation, you know, something is going to happen. But a week prior to Pearl Harbor, as I recall THE HONOLULU ADVERTISER, I believe, had the headlines, "Attack Expected Over the Weekend in the Pacific," or something like that anyway.

So on Wednesday, again --- you know, fifty years, your memory may be just a little bit faulty. I believe it was on Wednesday prior, we were put on the alert. And we took all the planes and we put them in their respective rebutments. And you know, there was an excitement building as, you know, why this alert, and we were told that it wasn't a practice, that, you know, this is something serious might happen, especially after reading the headlines.

SH: Did you --- was there the sense in the area that something might happen in Hawaii, or you were sort of reacting to events that were more likely to happen somewhere else?

JW: Well, it was sort of a mix. You know, you didn't want to believe it would happen in Hawaii. It was going to happen somewhere else, and yet the, deep within you, you were hoping it wouldn't. You know, it was, you really had no handle on it. And so from Wednesday until Friday --- and Friday, the alert was called off and we were asked to -- the planes were brought back to the hangar lines and lined up very neatly and we took all the weapons out and all the ammunition out, and it was put under lock and key. So then we felt better, you know, nothing is going to happen. After all, we --- the planes aren't going to be used. The alert is over. So . . .

SH: So that actually sort of relaxed the tension . . .

JW: Oh sure, oh yeah.

SH: . . . by lining up the planes.

JW: You bet. And we thought, well, it's a good time to go to Honolulu and December the second had been placed in tents.

SH: I wanted to ask you about the living arrangements and how, when an extra squadron, an additional squadron was created, did that then tax the facilities at the field?

JW: Mm-hm, mm-hm.

SH: A little overcrowded . . .

JW: Oh yes.

SH: Could you go into that?

JW: Well, we were . . .

SH: What the living arrangements were, what it was like.

JW: Well, the arrangements were relatively simple. They didn't have any place to put us other than tents. So the --- there was hangars and then the tents, and then the planes.

SH: So you went from barracks, because you were in the 47<sup>th</sup> [*Pursuit Squadron*], and then when they put you in the 72<sup>nd</sup> [*Pursuit Squadron*], they said, "Okay, out of your barracks," and . . .

JW: Yup.

SH: . . . into the tents?

JW: Into tents. Because we had expected to be transferred to some other place, not Hawaii, but you know, rumors were going wildly. We were going to Singapore, we were going here, we were going there. All we knew that we were a new squadron and we were living in tents. And in --- approximately to two very important structures that the enemy would, like, if they were an enemy, were the airplanes and hangars. And here we are, in between.

SH: Right.

JW: So that . . .

SH: Right out there, right in the . . .

JW: Sandwiched.

SH: . . . middle of the field. You certainly were.

JW: Right.

SH: Right out there in the open. Well, why don't we close in then on December 7. Would --- how did the night before go for you? Was that a . . .

JW: That was a very good night. I went to Honolulu.

SH: You did? Okay.

JW: And we had a lot of fun. As usual, we came back and . . .

SH: Get back late?

JW: Yeah, we came back late. I don't recall the time, but it wasn't early. So this was on Saturday night, Sunday morning, it's, as always, my habit that I learned as a child, that I went to church on Sunday morning. And being a Catholic, we always went to early mass. It was never late mass. So . . .

SH: What time was that?

JW: Well, when we used to go, eight, 8:30. So I was still used to that and I knew there was an early mass at Wheeler at seven o'clock. And about a quarter to seven, I woke up and I said, "Oh no, not this morning. I'll go late."

But laying there, it just seemed like there was an inner voice saying, "Come on John, get up."

And about five minutes to, I jumped out of bed and got my uniform on and chapel was just a little ways from there. And I got there just in time.

So when the mass ended, I think it ended probably about a quarter to, or something like that. And as we were walking back to our tent area, we heard planes overhead. And well, it had been on occasion where the Navy would fly over and see how quick the Army can get off the ground, just sort of a mock warfare. And so we thought, "Gee, that's the Navy."

Then we heard machine gun fire, and we thought, "That's unusual. Somebody's off their rocker here trying machine gun out over the field."

And then we heard the --- I looked up and you could see the planes begin to dive and then saw the rising sun on the wings and the first bomb let go, and we realized then what it was. And . . .

SH: Do you recall specifically whereabouts the planes came from? Do you remember . . .

JW: They came through Kolekole Pass.

SH: From that direction?

JW: Yes, from that direction. And they seemed to know exactly what they were after. And their approach, and you know, things happened so fast that I probably went to the most dangerous place there was. There was a pier beside the hangar, concrete pier. And I just call it a pier, pillar or whatever you call it.

SH: Pillar, okay.

JW: I got behind that.

SH: The hangar was at the rear of your tent area.

JW: Yeah, the tent area. I thought -- I've thought about it so often -- since they were trying to hit the hangar, and here I am. But as they came in,

I guess the thing that I will never forget is the grin on the gunner's face as he was moving his machine gun.

SH: This would be the . . .

JW: Spraying.

SH: . . . rear gunner. . .

JW: Yeah, the rear gunner.

SH: . . . on the dive bomber.

JW: They dropped their bombs and then they were circling to . . .

SH: You really saw so . . .

JW: Yeah, oh yes. I --- that was emblazoned. Because somehow, I --- he was seeing me, which I wouldn't [have] believed it, or he'd probably hit me because -- but I can remember they were so low. And then, of course, the tents were burning. Many of them, not all of them. And we came --- oh, we went back to the tents after the first wave. And they had a short second wave, which I don't know how long afterwards, but we were trying to help those, you know, that had been wounded and so forth. And then the call came, "Get out of there, they're coming again." You know, "We don't need any more casualties."

And after that, before the second wave, I had moved out, close behind that pillar. And when they yelled the second wave, I started getting out of there and I noticed ahead of me something moving in the grass, and there was a manhole cover. I don't know what made me head for that, but there were three other fellows in there already. There wasn't room for two bullfrogs, but there were four in there then. We pulled the cover over us and just as we did, we could hear the cannon fire bouncing off of -- they were just strafing it. I'm sure they didn't spot that particular manhole, but it was just -- had we been out of there, we probably would have gotten hit.

SH: So somewhere around the . . .

JW: Yeah.

SH: . . . flight line, or . . .

JW: Yeah, yeah. I was --- well it was near the base, medical building.

SH: What were you doing between the first wave and you were --- so you took cover in a rather exposed spot, as it turns out, by this concrete pillar. And then did you feel, did you have the sense that there was some sort of a lull going on . . .

JW: Yeah, yeah.

SH: . . . could sense, that you . . .

JW: Oh yeah.

SH: . . . tried to assist . . .

JW: Whatever you could, you know.

SH: . . . in any way you could.

JW: Yeah, yeah. There was a lull there.

SH: Did you try to help the wounded or work on the planes, or . . .

JW: No, no. The wounded, that was my concern. I --- the planes, I didn't know anything. I guess I never even thought about the airplanes. I thought the people there needed help. The planes were the least of my concern.

SH: So after the --- well, what happened then? After, I guess, we were at the point of you were in the manhole cover and . . .

JW: No, finally, we got up enough nerve to get out of there and we didn't have anything. We had no weapons of any kind, you know. And so it didn't take long for rumors to get started, "They're landing here, they're landing there."

My god, we didn't have anything to defend ourselves. And finally, you're all herded together and we were taken to Schofield Barracks. We walked over and we were issued weapons. My weapon was a forty-five caliber pistol with seven rounds of ammunition, which I had never fired in my life and I probably couldn't hit anybody if I'd had to. But that was my security blanket, was a forty-five caliber pistol. And the others, whatever weapons were available they were issued to them. And from there on, it seemed that little by little, order was restored and the units became integrated again, and began to function as units should.

SH: During the --- immediately after the attack -- or do you have any recollections of any of our planes either getting off the ground, or did you try -- do you have any recollection of you or any of your friends trying to rearm any of the planes, or helping them to get up in the air?

JW: Well, they did at --- [2<sup>nd</sup>]Lieutenant Taylor, who is General Taylor, retired, and [2<sup>nd</sup>]Lieutenant Welch -- I was, in my first armor experience was on his airplane. And of course, they had gone to Haleiwa.

SH: Yes.

JW: So we didn't go with them. He was still with the 47th and I was with the 72nd. But I --- when he came back to reload at Wheeler, and this, I wasn't involved in it, but some of the other fellows did try to help. But, no, afterwards, I didn't have anything to do with the planes right then. I had other duties.

SH: Immediately.

JW: Yeah. Oh yeah. Yeah, uh-huh.

SH: And your other duties were guard duties?

JW: Guard duty, mainly guard duty. And then there was the clean up.

SH: Clean up.

JW: Yeah, yeah.

SH: As somebody expressed to me, regarding, I guess, Kaneohe, there ended up being more people than planes pretty quickly, so . . .

JW: Yeah, yeah, that's true.

SH: . . . a lot of people weren't necessarily doing their regular duties.

JW: No, you had, you did what had to be done. And it didn't make any difference whether this was your assignment or not. If you felt it needed to be done, you did it. And it worked out, I think, there was a great many people who were heroes who were never recognized for it and they did what had to be done. There's one amusing story. There was a young fellow come in the unit and the first sergeant asked him what his name was, and he said, "My name is Brown. Just call me PPMO Brown."

So his whole career was PP Brown. One day, he said, "You know, I can fly one of those P-40s." And he was -- couldn't fly anything.

So he did try it and of course, he wrecked it and he was put in the guard-house at Wheeler. And as I understand it, of course, when the attack came, they let out the prisoners, and he was one of them. And he was the one that was on top of the guardhouse, firing machine gun. And as I understand it, he was, he got a pardon for that. So it was rather, you know, you think about it, the guy that was locked up, the one that was the hero.

SH: What is, as you think back on it, what's the most vivid memory that you recall from that day?

JW: I guess the, you know, as time goes by, the most vivid memory is probably my getting up and going to church. Is that time to be there, had I not done that, I probably wouldn't have been there. And I have thought so often about that, that how gracious the lord was to do that, you know. It doesn't happen every day. And it probably --- that would be it, is the fact that I am a survivor. There's no heroics, there's just a private who was scared to death that did what he could do, and I guess that's about it.

SH: You recall, do you recall what your reactions or feelings were about the Japanese at that time?

JW: Well, I think they were, you know, I suppose, hatred and anger, and all the whole mixed feelings. Why did you do this? What have we done to you? And it was that build up, you know, that you form in your mind and I suppose it's, was building up, necessarily, all on facts. It was built on emotions and the emotions of others that bring you to that boiling point. And, yeah, it's difficult.

SH: After fifty years, what are your feelings about that day?

JW: After fifty years, I really don't have time left in my life to be concerned about what happened then. It's happened, I can't change it. I have



no hard feelings. I have no hatred. It's just, let life go on. And I look at all those old duffers over here. It's our last hurrah. We're over here again. And the sooner we admit that, the better off we'd be. We won't get our --- we won't develop the ulcers as we go.

And I continued on the --- I stayed in the service for six years and then I stayed with the active reserve and the guard. But after I left Hawaii, see, I left in '43.

SH: Yeah, what did you -- just briefly describe, go through your subsequent service in Hawaii before you left. And maybe we can just briefly mention your subsequent military career also.

JW: Well, I stayed . . .

SH: What did you do in Hawaii?

JW: Well, I stayed as armor. Yeah, we were at Bellows Field and Dillingham Field, and also Barber's Point.

SH: With the 72nd pursuit . . .

JW: Yes, yes.

SH: . . . you stayed 'til '43?

JW: Yeah.

SH: Okay.

JW: Yeah, I left in '43, March of '43.

SH: Did it continue to have the P-40s?

JW: Yes. Yes. And the history of the 72nd, they went through the Pacific to the different islands and so forth. I don't know the exact history of it.

SH: But you left in Midway . . .

JW: Yeah, '43, March of '43.

SH: And what was your subsequent army career? Why did you leave and where did you end up?

JW: Well, I wanted to become an Air Force cadet. And due to the fact I hadn't been a citizen long enough. You had to be a citizen ten years. I was born in Germany. I hadn't been a citizen that long. I was refused, so I thought, well, gee, I'm going home. You know, even paradise gets monotonous. And so I applied for armory school and I was accepted. I was in three weeks from graduation as a second lieutenant and I thought, well, regulations state that if you resign, you go back to your old outfit. Well, as it turned out, that wasn't true any more and three of us met the colonel and he said, "Do you really want to resign?"

And we said, "Yes."

He said, "Now, I have news for you, you are now in the armor."

So I didn't get back to my Air Corps. And I stayed in the armament, armor division until middle of '44.

SH: What armor outfit was that?

JW: That was 20th Armory Division, Camp-- Fort Campbell, Kentucky. And then I went to OCS at Fort Benning, Georgia. And from Fort Benning, Georgia, I was sent to Germany and that was in the fore part of December of 1944. And I missed . . .

SH: But somehow you ended up in the infantry. You didn't try it in armor, did you?

JW: No, no, no. No, I was state side in armor. Thank god. (Laughs) I didn't want to be in combat in the tanks, if I could help.

SH: So briefly, you ended up in, in the 28th Division, you said . . .

JW: Twenty-eighth.

SH: . . . 110th Regiment, 28th Division.

JW: Yeah. Mm-hm. Yeah, I was executive officer there and I when I got out, I stayed with the reserve and the guard, and my total time of service was 32 years retired as a Lieutenant Colonel and have seven children and a wonderful wife, eighteen grandchildren and just having a ball. Life has been good to me. Ten years ago I was ordained a deacon in the Catholic Church and so that's keeping us both busy. I'm an administrator of one of the churches, so rather than get our motor home and retire, the lord said, "Look what I did for you. What are you going to do for me?"

SH: Well, Mr. Wilberding, thanks so much for sharing your experiences and your life with us. It's really been a very interesting pleasure talking with you.

JW: Well, thank you very much. It's been a pleasure relating it and hopefully this would be something my grandchildren will treasure.

SH: Well, they'll have a chance to see it. Thanks again.

JW: Thank you, you're welcome.

END OF INTERVIEW